ORIGINAL GIFT

December 24, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 40:1-11
Luke 2:1-16

"...for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." -Luke 2:11 (RSV)

Whatever was going on that night, it was very important, perhaps the most important thing that was likely ever to happen in their drab lives, so they made haste... they hurried off... then ran. In W. H. Auden's A Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being, the shepherds are discussing the ordinariness of their routine, the boring sameness of the job, tending sheep by night... The most engaging responsibility they have is making sure the water doesn't freeze before morning.

"The winter night requires our constant attention
Watching that water and good will
Warmth and well being, may still be
there in the morning."

Then the angels appear -

"Unto you a child is born
And frigid silence
Meditates a song
For great joy has filled
The narrow and the sad."

The shepherds cry -

"Let us run to learn
How to love and run
Let us run to Love."

And out on the hillside the chorus says:

"That after today
The children of men
May be certain that
The Father Abyss
Is affectionate
To all its creatures,
All, all, all of them.
Run to Bethlehem."

And so we do, all of us, run to Bethlehem. Even if it has no identifiable theological content for us, even if we never heard of and couldn't care less about incarnation, election, redemption, we do - all of us - on this day, run to Bethlehem. And the reason they, as we, drop what we are doing and in some way run to Bethlehem has to do with love.

Do you recall those Christmas gifts you made in kindergarten or elementary school? A friend of mine reminded a group of us recently and smiles of recognition appeared on each face. We rummaged around in our memories and each could remember, and we all laughed... We made pot holders, and hot pads, and stone paper weights covered with sparkles, and Popsicle stick pencil holders, and flower pots with poinsettia stickers. They weren't much to look at. Sometimes they barely made it home. The pot holders usually came unraveled and were soiled and sticky before we were done with them. The pencil holders came unglued. My best effort was a yule log candle holder. Only the boys got to make them, I suppose because it involved heavy manual labor, and that was in the days when we prepared little boys for manhood by letting them work with wood, while little girls baked cookies. The school custodian had sawed the trunk of a pine tree into foot-long lengths. Our job was to hold our yule log while he drilled three candle holes with a brace and bit. Then we worked for weeks. I'm not sure doing what; tying a bow around it, I suppose, adding some holly. It was glorious: at least the picture was. But with the three big red candles in the holes my yule log wouldn't remain upright, but listed and then rolled over to starboard, so mine came with an additional piece - a wedge of pine which when placed appropriately, made my yule log stable; although I recall his solemn advice... "Maybe you better not light the candles."

Those gifts we made were gifts of great love; and we brought them home and hid them under the bed or in the closet with mounting anticipation, and then finally gave them with noble intent and hearts bursting with love.

How very wise it was. How wise of those patient teachers who introduced to us the joy of giving ourselves in our love. How wise of the recipients of those modest gifts who oohed and aahed and told us how pleased they were.

"All, all, all run to Bethlehem," and the reason is that more than anything in the world we need to love. All run to Bethlehem because the best part of us is somehow revealed there, the part of us that makes and gives gifts of love.

Now, in that simple and potentially maudlin sentence there is a very ambitious intellectual proposition...

More than anything we need to love.

We are, Judith Viorst says, "wired for love." In her bestseller, Necessary Losses," Ms. Viorst, out of her own psychotherapeutic experience and study, proposes an alternative to the Freudian theory that we love because our mothers fed us and we forever equate oral gratification with that person who feeds us if we are good. The alternative she says is that we are "wired for love from the start... that the need for human connection is fundamental..." [Necessary Losses, p. 19]

The late Reuel Howe, Episcopal priest and theologian, taught many of us in his many books, and at his Institute For Advanced Pastoral Studies, about the spiritual dimension of our relationships, and therefore the connections between psychology and theology. Dr. Howe helped us put in a theological context what psychologists were beginning to teach us about emotional health and healthy relationships: namely that the ability to love is fundamental to our humanity, and that the ability is given to us as we are loved. We awaken the ability to love in children, he told parents, by loving them unconditionally. And without that love, without that sense of unconditional acceptance, the theological term for which is grace, we are condemned to a lifetime of trying to demonstrate our worth, earn our acceptance, win someone's love...

We are, it would seem, made for love. When we lose the ability to love, we lose something essential to our humanity. Dostoevsky said: "I am convinced that the only hell which exists is the inability to love."

One of the theologians whose thinking and writing is attracting attention today is Canadian, Douglas John Hall. In a fascinating recent book, Imaging God, Hall explores the contemporary meaning of the somewhat perplexing doctrine that human beings are created in God's image.

Thorough scholar that he is, Hall comes at the topic from every conceivable direction and concludes that God's image in us is our ability to live in relationship with others...

"The single, simple and even obvious point... is that we are created for relationship... 'love' is the essence of our humanity as the creator intends." [p. 119]

That is an elegant way of saying "we are wired for love."

Hall goes in deeper. In philosophic categories, he proposes that "being as such" is relational. "Human being" does not even exist in the abstract; he says a self-made, independent, totally autonomous human being is a contradiction in terms. We are human, only in relationship. Or, as St. Paul put it, "even if I have prophetic powers, can speak in many languages, have all knowledge, and have not love, I am nothing."

And then Hall helps us see that the Judeo-Christian tradition makes a breathtaking assertion about God. As human beings are human only in

relationship, so it is with God. "There is no interest in our tradition in God alone," he says. God is God only in relationship... It is the nature of God to be in relationship.

"The Biblical God is busy from the first sentence of Genesis making beings who can participate... 'I will be your God and you will be my people.' God is, means God loves." [p. 119]

That may be a little nebulous for the day before Christmas. What we know for sure is the mysterious power of human love. There are many studies now which document the fact that pain, for instance, is moderated by the touch of a human hand. If you have undergone major surgery I think you probably know about that: how powerful, how simply good it is, to feel the touch of a human hand, particularly if the hand belongs to someone you love.

Dr. Bernie Siegel's popular book, Love, Medicine and Miracles, is about his experience treating critically ill and dying patients. It's a very honest book which has helped and encouraged and sustained a lot of very sick people, including a dear friend of mine who gave it to me before she died.

"Love sends a live message to the body," he wrote. He was treating a woman whose fight with malignancy was about over. Siegel knew that she had a lot of unresolved conflict with her husband. She wanted simply to be left alone and to die alone in the hospital. He took a chance. He sent her home with the prescription: "Straighten out your relationship with your husband." She did. And she got better for a while, "a little healing miracle" he called it; a three month remission before she died, during which she did important and beautiful things with her family." [p. 209]

Dr. Siegel is convinced that the reason Mother Teresa doesn't contract the tuberculosis which many of the dying patients she helps are carrying, in fact why it is a health care truism that dedicated doctors and nurses do not often contract the dread diseases they treat, is the power of love. "I am convinced," he says, sounding a little like St. Paul in Romans 8, "that unconditional love is the most powerful known stimulant to the immune system." [p. 181]

Siegel reports his observation that many critically ill people believe there is a "flaw at the center of their being" and that learning to accept and to give love conquers the fear of death. "Death," he reports one of his patients saying, "is not the worst thing. Life without love is worse," or putting it positively - love conquers all, even death.

One of the great privileges of ministry is to witness that in the lives of brave people and somehow to bear witness to it.

And so, the greatest gift we have been given, the original gift, is the ability to love. It comes, of course, in the form of someone else's love for us. We are enabled to love, empowered to love as we are loved. But the best of us, the original gift, the image of God in us, is the ability to be lovers.

To lose that - by cruel circumstance - being deprived of the secure love of parents, or worse yet by neglect and abuse, to lose the ability to love because we are afraid of the risks, or by simple self-centeredness, is to lose the best part of ourselves, the most delightful and delectable possibilities of our own lives. It is also to distance ourselves from the God who is love.

Reuel Howe put that in a way I have never forgotten:

"We do not find love by looking for it: we find it by giving it. And when we find love by loving, we find God. Our Lord gave his love generously, not in order that we might be loved, but that we might be free to love one another... If someone came to me and asked, 'How can I find God?' I would answer, 'Go find someone to love and you will find God.'" [Herein is Love, p. 45]

I was reminded of that when I read in the paper recently about Columbus-Maryville Reception Center on West Belmont, a program which deals with the increasing numbers of drug addicted new born infants. Babies born with cocaine or heroin addiction undergo classic withdrawal from what amounts to a "nine-month high." Some cry for hours and cannot be consoled. Some become as stiff as a two by four when you try to hold them. Some shake all over. Some can't keep food down at all. They are in serious medical trouble. There are only two things medical science knows what to do for a cocaine baby - submerge him in warm water, or hold him, cuddle him.

And so there are volunteers: 120 women and 20 men who volunteer as cuddlers. "Cuddling helps keep addicted babies alive" announced the headline.

"If you want to find God, go find someone to love."

It reminded me of the people who tutor, who visit the lonely at Cook County Hospital, Cook County Jail, people who spend Saturday painting an apartment at Cabrini-Green or installing bathroom fixtures in a Habitat for Humanity house or cooking meals for the homeless, or working in shelters. It reminded me of the thousands of volunteer hours invested in the modest effort of enhancing life for other human beings - helping those on the outside looking in know that someone knows they're there.

It is our calling as a community of Christian people, our privilege to express to others the mysterious power of love: to be a community of love where lonely, isolated individuals, poor and homeless, or affluent and upwardly mobile, are welcomed, accepted and loved.

More than anything in the world we need to love. And if we know anything at all about this topic, it is that we learn to love as we learn that we are loved. It may require being accessible, being vulnerable, open, accepting: being receptive to love often means being quiet and listening very carefully...

Robert Fulghum tells how his daughter gave him a brown paper bag one time. In the bag were useless items: a few ribbons, three stones, a plastic dinosaur, two dried up chocolate kisses, and how without thinking, he took it to work, looked in it and threw it away. When he came home from work his daughter asked for the paper bag. He asked why and she said that it contained things she liked. She said, "You didn't lose it, did you? I forgot to put a note in." The note she handed him said, "I love you daddy." So, back to work he went and he and the janitor, who was a parent and understood, emptied out all the trash on the desk top until they found the bag and its modest contents.

Fulghum writes: "Molly had given me her treasures. All that a seven-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack... there wasn't anything there I needed. Dear God!"

So love is easy to miss sometimes. You really do have to be ready for it, have to wait for its coming, have to listen and watch because it comes in a Popsicle stick pencil holder, or an unexpected embrace, or undeserved forgiveness. Love comes quietly in generous gestures of caring and compassion and kindness and one time it came when a baby was born in Bethlehem.

It is the nature of the divine to love; it is God's dearest, most precious hope, that you and I will learn to love by accepting the original gift... God's love in Jesus Christ.

So the poet has the shepherds long ago -

"...run to learn
How to love and run
Let us run to love.
All, all, all of them,
Run to Bethlehem."

All we can do is run - all of us - run to Bethlehem. And there, receive gratefully and extend to others the love we have been given, the original gift.

"What can I give him. Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wiseman, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him --
Give my heart."

Amen.